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A New Era in US-ASEAN Relations?

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THIS week Singapore will host a visit by United States President George W. Bush. According to White House sources, the occasion will provide the embattled president to lay out his vision of how the US and Asian nations can collaborate in tackling the problems of poverty, disease, terrorism and energy security. But while speculation has been rife on how a Democrat-controlled U.S. Congress would change the Bush Administration's foreign policy towards the Middle East, less attention has been paid to a series of developments, which predate the recent Democrat victory in the mid-term elections, that could potentially herald a new era in U.S.-ASEAN ties.

Washington's relations with Southeast Asia have been characterised as ambivalent. Its policy towards the Southeast Asian region during and after the Cold War has vacillated between deep engagement and benign neglect. However, with the terrorist bombings in Bali, Indonesia on October 10, 2002, Southeast Asia resolutely resurfaced on the American policy radar. The region was immediately labeled by US officials and pundits alike as the "second front" of the Global War on Terror. This, of course, was not exactly the terms of engagement Southeast Asians would have preferred, although some allowed that this sort of attention, while unfortunate, was better than none. Be that as it may, ensuing American preoccupation with Afghanistan and Iraq was perceived within regional quarters to have distanced Washington from Southeast Asian security concerns yet again. This perception appeared to be confirmed by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's glaring absence from the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting of August 2005. This marked the nadir of U.S.-ASEAN relations in recent times.

Turning the Corner?

Of late, there is compelling evidence that Washington is recalibrating its policy towards Southeast Asia. At least four developments over the past few months are noteworthy. First, in November 2005, President Bush met with leaders of the seven ASEAN states which are members of APEC (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) on the sidelines of the APEC Summit in Busan, South Korea. The meeting resulted in the establishment of the US-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership, which was envisaged to advance cooperation on political, security, economic, and social fronts. The significance of this achievement transcended the scope of the agreement; its timing was equally critical since it came nary three months after Secretary Rice's notable absence at the 2005 ARF meeting.

Second, in May 2006, Senator Richard Lugar tabled the "US Ambassador for ASEAN Act" to the Congress. The proposed legislation was co-sponsored by a bipartisan group of senators, including former US presidential candidate John Kerry. The role of the ASEAN envoy was to engage ASEAN *as a whole* rather than bilaterally with each ASEAN member government. Given Washington's traditional apprehension with ASEAN regionalism and its preference for bilateral engagement with its Southeast Asian partners, this initiative signals a rethinking of the importance of ASEAN as a regional institution in US policy.

Third, on October 1, 2006, the Pentagon announced the creation of a key post, at the assistant secretary for defence level, within the Department of Defense focusing on Asian security. While North Korea, the rise of China, and terrorism were cited as the key strategic concerns driving this initiative, provisions, interestingly enough, were nonetheless made for a deputy assistant secretary to cover Southeast Asia. This shift is crucial given that the Pentagon's past approach to Asia had been to lump the entire Asian region under the office of assistant secretary for international security. This clearly demonstrates a more nuanced appreciation for the complexities and diversity of security issues in the vast Asian region, not least Southeast Asia.

Finally, there is evidence to suggest that think-tanks and research institutions in the US which focus on the Asia-Pacific region have received increased attention, not to mention funding, from the US Government. This further demonstrates an acknowledgement on the part of Washington that informed engagement with Southeast Asia should be predicated on, among other things, research and intellectual exchanges between US scholars and their regional counterparts.

Why Bother?

What accounts for this apparent turn in US policy towards Southeast Asia? There are at least three reasons. First, Washington must surely realise that in the contest for influence in the region, the US has been losing out to China. Over the past decade, Beijing has demonstrated a diplomatic savvy as expressed by a range of declarations and agreements reached with ASEAN, such as the ASEAN-China free trade agreement, the Declaration on the South China Sea, Chinese accession to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and the like. This contrasts starkly with the ambiguous state of US-Southeast Asian ties over the same period. Against this backdrop, the recent developments initiated by Washington could mark an attempt both to counter Chinese influence and enhance America's standing in Southeast Asia.

Related to the above point are the issues of anti-Americanism, which has been on the rise since September 11, 2001, and the growing disapproval of perceived US unilateralism. Already, the past few years have witnessed widespread anti-American protests and demonstrations in various Southeast Asian countries. A fair part of this had to do with Washington's seeming lack of sensitivity for regional considerations. Adopting a more nuanced and institution-based engagement, as appears to be the case with these recent initiatives, will be important to enhancing communication and understanding between the US and Southeast Asia, thereby alleviating anti-American sentiments.

Finally, given that Washington has come to realize the need for an expansive, holistic strategy in the war on terror, improved relations with Southeast Asia will be critical to that end. Five years into the war on terror, it has become ~~diagnostically~~ clear that a purely militaristic

approach can only go so far. In contrast, Washington's cooperation with ASEAN, for whom counter-terrorism involves comprehensive approaches, has proved relatively successful; for instance, the capture of the Jemaah Islamiyah operative Hambali was the result of robust intelligence collaboration between the US and several ASEAN countries. This and other examples underscore the utility of enhanced US-Southeast Asian cooperation:

In sum, while it may be premature to judge the outcome of the initiatives described above, it is clear that US-ASEAN ties are primed for a shift, driven in part by Washington's realisation that its past levels and scope of engagement with Southeast Asia had been insufficient to ensure that US security goals in the region were satisfactorily met. While Democrat control of the Congress will not change this assessment, the likelier challenge will be whether progress on the aforementioned initiatives might be inadvertently hindered by the potential for partisan deadlock on other more controversial concerns. Are we witnessing a new era in US-ASEAN relations?

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